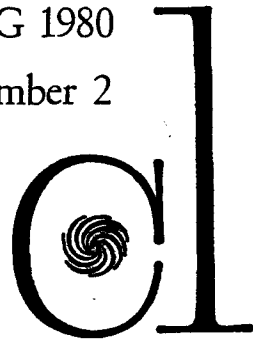


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The Originality of Texts In a Manuscript Culture

THIS PAPER will perhaps make more or better sense if I say beforehand that it is controlled by a distinction between two kinds of text: the closed text of a print culture and the open text of a manuscript culture. I use the word "kinds," but really my subject has to do with the ways in which textuality is imagined, and with the ways in which this imagining bears upon or, indeed, shapes the act of writing. This is, of course, an impossibly large subject, against which I can only claim for my neat distinction an abstract and chiefly heuristic value: like most distinctions, this one serves mainly to regulate an inquiry, and (as in the best of times) to show what sorts of conclusions one may desire.

By a closed text I mean simply the results of an act of writing that has reached a final form. What form this finality will take is variable in nearly every respect that one can imagine, but there is this interesting feature: a text is generally said to be finished when it succeeds into print (whereupon it is called a "work"). Print closes off the act of writing and authorizes its results. The text, once enclosed in print, cannot be altered—except at considerable cost and under circumstances carefully watched over by virtually everyone: readers, critics, the book industry, the legal profession, posterities of every stripe, and so on. There are numerous (numberless) complicated forces of closure in a print culture, although one hardly notices them because they are so rarely challenged. One has to imagine odd cases, such as that of the serial novelist who is compelled to produce a heterogeneous text because he cannot, once an episode has been published, revise it on behalf of continuity. Publication closes him off from his work and poses in turn a dramatic obstacle to invention. What is printed cannot be altered—except, of course, to produce a revised version or edition, which is the result of a reopening that introduces into the text new or different matter, or removes from it mat-

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ter affronted by history. The world of revisions is richly complicated, and is a famous source of delight or exasperation among literary critics, especially those who must contend with writers who can leave nothing unrewritten and whose canon thus contains many different published versions of single poems. Think of Robert Lowell's work, and the odd complaint that he ruined many poems by changing them.¹ What does such a complaint presuppose about the nature of a text? What does it mean to rewrite (or to have different versions of) a single poem? In what does the singleness of any poem consist?

I raise these questions in order to evade them, because this paper is a sort of meditation on some of the ways in which texts remain open in a manuscript culture. The topics of this meditation are Originality, Imitation, Translation, and Plagiarism, which appear to mean one thing in relation to modern notions of textuality and quite another in relation to medieval and Renaissance thinking. (One notices almost reflexively how little these terms have to do with an oral or preliterate culture.) Rumination upon these topics may help us to perceive differences in the meaning or conception of textuality—differences that have the advantage of being historical as well as theoretical in character. They are at all events not semiotic differences, which is no doubt why they seem to me places of refuge for my slender resources.

Originality, Imitation, Translation, Plagiarism: one way to engage these topics is to conceive them as events that record the gradual loss of authority, or (if we reverse the sequence) that describe an ascent from apprenticeship to mastery. At one pole we may imagine an act of creation *ex nihilo*, or the primordial Saying of Heidegger's poet, or simply a rhetorical genesis that results in a "new" work; at the other we may imagine an act of bogus authorship, the scribal despair that Borges dramatizes in "The Library of Babel," for example, or the youthful poet's characteristic idolatry. "He is so much in love with Vergil's charms," Petrarch says of his apprentice, "that he often inserts bits of Vergil into his own work."² Imitation and translation for their part are functions of learning that replicate or appeal to the authority of a prior text or model; yet they are also acts that disturb such priorities, often without intending to. Quintilian observes that "it is often easier to achieve more than to achieve the same; an exact replica is very difficult."

¹ A related phenomenon is the modern desire for Works in Progress, which no one knew better than James Joyce how to stimulate and satisfy to his own authorial benefit. A late or cold version of this desire is the scholarly tendency to raise into print texts like the first draft version of *Finnegans Wake*, which (to speak correctly) is not really a version at all but a draft, which for its part is by definition that part or stage of a work that does not get published.

² *Letters from Petrarch*, trans. Morris Bishop (Bloomington, Ind., 1966), p. 198. The quotation is from a letter to Boccaccio dated October 28, 1366.

Originality is a sort of happy accident that disrupts imitation. What Quintilian means is that individuality is luckily difficult to suppress. In principle, he says, "every imitation is a mere artifact, accommodated to someone else's scheme"; but in reality—in the domain of "nature and real vitality"—imitation always produces a difference, because it comprises virtues that cannot be taught or borrowed: "Talent, facility of discovery, force, fluency, everything that art cannot supply—these things," Quintilian says, "are not imitable." As the saying goes, eloquence is an art of nature as well as of the school. Moreover, as invention is the lesson of learning, so improvement becomes the motive of imitation, as in the poet's desire to transform a brazen world into a golden, or when a certain writer is said to have stimulated the envy of his originals: "No art," says Quintilian, "is as it was when it was discovered, or has confined itself to its starting-place."⁸ Similarly, a translation may seem, as Don Quixote said, like the reverse side of a tapestry, but it may also recover a lost (or achieve a new) efficacy, as in the King James or "Authorized" version of Scripture, which competes, in the absence of the original, against various antecedent translations, and prevails, where it can, by dint of royal decision and by the special way it graces the vernacular. It also bends divine authority to Jacobean purpose, and so God's Word is doubly forged. To complete this thought: between imitation and translation other categories (besides forgery) intervene: parody, adaptation, collaboration, quotation, allusion, diverse codes of attribution ("as myn auctour seyde, so sey I"), the utterance of commonplace matter, mnemonic storytelling (who could not extend this list?). Concerning stories and commonplaces we may wonder what happens when an oral tradition is subsumed or overlaid by a manuscript culture, such that the authority of the tradition is altered or diverted by the authority of bookish learning that textual traditions strive to maintain. (One thing that happens is that authors come into being as ways of figuring the presence and dominion of an authority that has literally been silenced, as when the authority of the oral tradition is translated into the eponymous authority of Homer, Moses, Aristotle, and so on.) Precisely what sort of authority, however, does a text possess in a manuscript or scribal culture? What I mean especially to ask is: What sort of finality does a manuscript possess, particularly in relation to the rights, privileges, and conventional arrogations of a "later hand"?

Here I want simply to recall three well-known features of writing in a manuscript culture: (1) the grammarian's art of embellishment; (2)

⁸ *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations*, trans. M. Winterbottom, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1972), p. 401. The quotations are from the *Institutio oratoria*, 10.2, 8, 10-13.

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the desire to produce a vernacular text; and (3) the clerical as opposed to vatic or Orphic concept of *poiesis*, which constrains writing in ways that we have forgotten, in part because such writing remains innocent of any implicit or corollary claim to creativity. (Not until the eighteenth century was writing considered to be the result of a "creative" act; until then a writer was likely to desire fecundity and to think of creativity as an attribute of God or a power of the king, at whose word peers of the realm are brought into being.) In each of these cases—grammatical embellishment, vernacular writing, clerical making—the terms "originality," "imitation," "translation," and "plagiarism" are not at all what we may mean them to be: they come into play chiefly as variations on the archaic theme of authority.

Consider, for example, Chaucer in relation to Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*: What did Chaucer really do to this antecedent text when (evidently with the help of a French intermediary) he conjured from it his *Troilus and Criseyde*? Chaucer's narrator, who claims merely to be relating his literal or faithful translation of a Latin text, does not speak with authority on this point; or, rather, he speaks with a fictional authority that has been carefully constructed (and sharply restricted) by the author, who chooses to conceal his originality, which is to say the faithlessness of his translation, the diversions and elaborations of his imitation, his own talent, facility of discovery, and so on. (Plagiarism is evidently not at issue; no one is certain why it isn't.) Certainly, one reason for this deferral of authority becomes apparent in the Envoy:

But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
But subgit be to alle poesy;
And kis the steppes, where as thow seest pace
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.
(V.1789-92)⁴

These lines recall the tradition of the *sermo humilis*, the humble or lowly style which is, however, "secretly sublime,"⁵ for its purpose is to render lofty themes (tragedy, love, Christian doctrine) accessible to every manner of audience. To circulate the tragedy of *Troilus and Criseyde* through a clerkly, plain-spoken, loveless but warm- and open-hearted narrator is to execute this style with unexceptionable decorum. It is in the self-effacing spirit of the *sermo humilis* that Chaucer commends his book to the "moral Gower" and the "philosophical Strode" (V.1856-57)—commends it wholly and without reserve, granting to them the authorial privilege of correcting his book wherever they might think it

⁴ *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston, 1957), p. 479; subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

⁵ Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1965), p. 65.

necessary. This humility, moreover, is doubly conventional, for it coincides with what we might call the grammarian's "ethos," which enjoins the subordination of authorial will to the ideal of a "correct" text—a text correct in its words and usage, in the rendering of its matter, and above all in its doctrine. "For myne wordes, heere and every part," the narrator says of his own (admitted) enlargements upon Lollius, "I speke hem alle under correccioun," and accordingly he confers upon his audience ("yow that felyng han in loves art") the right to emend his text in turn—"To encesse or maken dymynucioun / Of my langage" (III.1331-36).

We still retain some low sense of what it means to speak under correction, as when we yield certain points to colleagues and editors, but it will be good to pause over a second ancient example: Petrarch's Latin translation of Boccaccio's tale of Griselda (*Decameron*, X.10). Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio about this, explicitly to mention Horace's precept that translators should not try to render their originals word for word. Accordingly, Petrarch says, "I have told your tale in my own language, in some places changing or even adding a few words, for I felt you would not only permit, but would approve, such alterations."⁶ The alterations, of course, are considerable, the more so because what Petrarch calls his "language" entails a theory of what is required to write in that language. Petrarch translates Boccaccio's story not only laterally into a different tongue but upwardly into a more noble style (*stilo nunc alto*), and this noble style stipulates in turn large amplifications of matter. Or, again, Petrarch transposes the story from the locality of the vernacular to the universality of Latin, which is a way of finishing the story and publishing it to the world. The vernacular text becomes a learned text. It may be that we can most accurately describe what Petrarch thought he was doing by saying that he translated Boccaccio's story into Literature: a story that does not make its way into Latin is a story that goes to waste, because it acquires no institutional reality. At all events Petrarch's translation confers upon the vernacular story the authority of a Latin text, and thus we may think of the translation as a way of enshrining the story or finding for it a permanent authoritative place. From this follows the important point that Petrarch's presumption is not an insult but a tribute: it is a way of honoring Boccaccio, Boccaccio's story, and the language in which the story was originally composed. A final point is that Petrarch's presumption is not presumption of any sort; his translation is not unauthorized but is sanctioned by the grammarian's ethos.

⁶ *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, trans. James Harvey Robinson (1898; rpt. New York, 1970), p. 193.

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Even so late or modern a writer as Dryden understood this ethos very well. In his Preface to *Fables, Ancient and Modern*—a miscellany of his translations, “to which,” he says, “I have added some Original Papers of my own”⁷—Dryden remarks of Chaucer’s *Troilus* that it had already been “written by a Lombard Author; but much amplified by our English Translatour, as well as beautified; the Genius of our Countrymen in general being rather to improve an invention, than to invent themselves” (pp. 101-02). Nor did Dryden, in translating Chaucer into “modern *English*,” scruple to improve upon his original—did not hesitate to add, as he says, “somewhat of my own where I thought my Author was deficient, and had not given his Thoughts their true Lustre, for want of Words in the Beginning of our Language. And to this I was the more embolden’d, because (if I may be permitted to say it of myself) I found that I had a Soul congenial to his, and that I had been conversant in the same Studies. Another Poet, in another Age, may take the same liberty with my Writings; if at least they live long enough to deserve Correction” (p. 111).

Our Sons their Fathers’ failing *Language* see,
And such as *Chaucer* is, shall Dryden be.

An interesting sidenote is that in his Preface Dryden describes translation as a “transfusion” (pp. 112-13), by which he means the transfusion of new life into an old text, or of new efficacy into an archaic or obsolete utterance; but he also means the reincarnation of the original author in a new writer: “Spenser more than once insinuates, that the Soul of Chaucer was transfused into his Body” (p. 95)—one recalls the way Ennius thought himself the reincarnation of Homer. Dryden possesses, he says, “a Soul congenial” to Chaucer’s, such that he translates first by becoming Chaucer, not as Chaucer was, of course, but as he would have been had he lived in the seventeenth century, when (among other ripenings) the English vernacular had sufficiently matured to become capable of a Latin or literary “correctness.” Chaucer lived, Dryden says, “in the infancy of our Poetry, and . . . nothing is brought to Perfection at the first. We must be Children before we grow Men” (p. 105).

Transfusion, however, is a rich and variable metaphor. In *Mac Flecknoe* Dryden uses it as a synonym for plagiarism:

When did his Muse from *Fletcher* scenes purloin,
As thou whole *Eth’ridg* dost transfuse to thine?

⁷ John Dryden, Preface to *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Writings*, ed. John J. Mahoney (Indianapolis, 1965), p. 96. Further references to the Preface and references below to the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* will be to this edition.

But so transfus'd as Oyl on waters flow,
His always floats above, thine sinks below.⁸

In Shadwell's case, of course, it is as though old life had been transfused into new deadness, without effect: the best parts of Shadwell's plays remain the plays of Etherege. But this raises the question: Had Shadwell other than a genius for sinking—had he a "Soul congenial" to Etherege's—would these transfusions constitute a plagiarism? They would, no doubt, but the matter has its oddities. In *Of Dramatick Poesy* Crites says of Ben Jonson (by way of praising him as "the greatest man of the last age") that "he was not only a professed *Imitator* of Horace, but a learned Plagiary of all the others; you track him every where in their Snow" (p. 15). To which Neander later adds:

He was deeply conversant in the Ancients, both Greek and Latine, and he borrowed boldly from them: there is scarce a Poet or Historian among the Roman Authors of those times whom he has not translated in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*. But he has done his Robberies so openly, that one may see he fears not to be taxed by any Law. He invades Authors like a Monarch, and what would be theft in other Poets is onely victory in him. With the spoils of these Writers he so represents *old Rome* to us, in its Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs, that if one of their Poets had written either of his Tragedies, we had seen less of it then in him. If there was any Fault in his Language, 'twas that he weaved it too closely and laboriously, in his serious Plays: perhaps too, he did a little too much Romanize our Tongue, leaving the Words which he translated almost as much Latin as he found them. (p. 50)

So well, it seems, did Jonson plagiarize that he verged upon originality; or, again, so "conversant" was he in the Ancients that he mastered them and assumed their authority.

Jonson's authority derives in fact from the tradition of the *translatio studii*, the transference of the dominion of learning from the empire of the Ancients (Athens, "*old Rome*") to that of the Moderns: Paris, the "new Rome" of Christianity, and even London. Dryden's point is that Jonson is the true translator: he did not misuse this dominion—did not destroy it as a barbarian like Shadwell would have done—but was so "conversant" in Ancient learning that he became its legitimate heir and ruler. Jonson in this respect rules under the title of Grammarian-Poet (not the Philosopher-Poet, which is another, more remote lineage, with its own requisites of authority, such as the Virgilian power of ascending to the sublime or lofty style). The grammarian has always presided over the dominion of learning—has done so, with propriety and proprietorship, ever since that inaugural (if apocryphal) moment when Peisistratus, who ruled Athens from 560 to 527 B.C., gathered together Homer's fugitive texts and—and—inserted into the *Odyssey* (XI.631) a line of

⁸ *Works*, ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. (Berkeley, 1972), II, 59, lines 183-86.

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his own devising.⁹

Certainly this was a portentous deed. As codified by the Romans, grammar is said to consist of the "recte loquendi scientiam et poetarum enarrationem" (Quintilian), the recitation and interpretation of the poets. Strict grammatical interpretation, like Priscian's famous analysis of the first twelve lines of the *Aeneid*, entailed no more than the study of case, gender, number, and so on; elsewhere it included commentary on an author's prosody and his use of the figures, but in the Middle Ages it was not uncommon for such commentary to become an exegesis carried on under the sanction of embellishment, whereby the grammarian would add to a text a construction of his own—his own sense, thoughts, wisdom, and occasionally even evidence of his own skill in storytelling. Moreover, the medieval grammarian might literally add to the text, for such embellishment often took the form of marginal and (more interesting still) *interlinear* commentary. And it is at this point that differences between interpretation and invention, imitation and originality, translation and *poiesis*, one text and another, become hard to define. In his book *The Rise of Romance*, for example, Eugene Vinaver regards interlinear commentary as the formal nexus of grammar and romance writing. He observes that both Gottfried von Strassburg and Marie de France describe the romance writer's task explicitly as a form of secondary writing on the model of grammatical exegesis. In the Prologue to the *Lais* of Marie, for example, we are told that "it was the custom of the ancients, as witnessed by Priscian, to speak obscurely in the books they wrote so that those who came later and studied those books might construe the text and add their own thoughts."¹⁰ Accordingly,

⁹ See Plutarch, *Theseus*, 20.1-2. See also J. A. Davison, "The Transmission of the Text," *A Companion to Homer*, ed. Alan J. B. Wace and Frank H. Stubbings (London, 1963), pp. 215-33, esp. 218-23. This is a fascinating study, indispensable for any understanding of textuality. It contains such statements as: "There is no reason to suppose that the reading public in the late fifth century (or for two centuries after that) had any feeling that such a thing as a 'correct' text of the poems was desirable, much less attainable, or that it was the booksellers' business to provide it" (p. 221).

¹⁰ Trans. Eugene Vinaver, who quotes the passage in *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford, 1971), p. 16. See *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Rychner (Paris, 1966), p. 2:

Custume fu as anciens,
Ceo testimoine Preciens,
Es livres ke jadis feseient,
Assez oscurement diseient
Pur ceus ki a venir esteient
E ki aprendre les deveient,
K'i peüssent gloser la lettre
E de lur sen le surplus mettre.
(lines 9-16)

This passage has drawn the attention of many scholars. See especially Leo Spitzer,

"what a good romance writer is expected to do," Vinaver says, "is to reveal the *meaning* of the story . . . adding to it such embellishing thoughts as he considers appropriate; by doing this he would raise his work to a level of distinction which no straightforward narration could ever reach" (p. 17). As we know, medieval vernacular narratives are not customarily straightforward. Auerbach, comparing Virgil's treatment of Camilla in the *Aeneid* (VII.803-17) with its twelfth-century counterpart in the Old French *Enéas*, writes as follows:

It is . . . evident that though the Norman poet deals with the same incident as Vergil, he does so in an entirely different way. The main difference, from which all the others follow, is that he destroys the happening by continually interrupting it. In Vergil the references to Camilla's person are brief and so selected as to fit into the flowing movement. In Vergil, Camilla comes into view and rides past; not for a moment do we lose sight of this happening. The French poet interrupts it in the second line (3968); goes back to it almost fifty lines later (line 4008: *Vers l'ost chevalche la meschine*), but very briefly; and finally completes it, after a further interlude of almost eighty lines, in lines 4085-4106, without further interruption but with a leisurely garrulousness that contrasts sharply with Vergil's pace. The interstices are filled in with moralizing descriptions, and it is to these that the poet obviously attaches the greatest importance. Most modern critics find them overlong, inappropriate, and somewhat ridiculous.¹¹

The interstices are filled in with moralizing descriptions: in other words, the *Enéas* is written virtually between Virgil's lines, and for Auerbach this amounts almost to a defacement of the original text, because for Auerbach the original text is closed. To open it for embellishment is not to honor it but to "destroy" it. The rewriting of Virgil is an obliteration of him. But the point is that, contrary to our textbook definition of medieval romance as a chivalric tale, romance writing consists in what is done to such a tale. In the Proem to *Erec et Enide*, for example, Chrétien de Troyes speaks of himself as one who adds to "a story of adventure a pleasing argument"—"Et tret d'un conte d'avanture / Une mout bele conjointure"¹²—who fashions a more perfectly connected work, a more correct work, by which Chrétien means, however, not only a more carefully designed but also a more *sententious* work: a work of learning. For Chrétien, the story itself is only a point of departure: it is the matter to be imitated, but this imitation can only be made whole

"The Prologue to the *Lais* of Marie de France and Medieval Poetics," *MP*, 41 (1943), 96-102, but esp. pp. 101-02 on Priscian as the type of grammarian or "*homo literatus*." See also D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Marie de France, *Lais*, Prologue, 13-16," *MLN*, 64 (1949), 336-38, and Mortimer J. Donovan, "Priscian and the Obscurity of the Ancients," *Speculum*, 36 (1961), 75-80.

¹¹ Auerbach, p. 190.

¹² *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W. W. Comfort (London and New York, 1914), p. 1. The French text is from Chrétien, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Wendelin Foerster (Halle, 1884), III, 1.

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—can, indeed, only become authoritative—by what amounts to an interlinear expression of learning. Thus, in *Cligés*, the eyes of Alesandre and Soredamours meet, but this event is for Chrétien an opening, as though between the lines of his original, for an analysis of love—a discourse of learning that “fills in” the book that he has before him (or, conceivably, in his memory) as he writes. To be sure, this discourse takes the form of two extended interior monologues, but the monologues are not instances of *mimesis* or characterization; they are enunciations built up from a doctrine of love—imitations, if you like, of clerkly instruction: treatises. As Vinaver says, “Chrétien lets the characters enact a line of argument that happens to interest him, no matter what kind of characterization, real or unreal, may emerge from the result.”¹³

For Chrétien, imitation is not of nature, nor is it strictly the imitation of a text; rather, it is an imitation of antique authority: it is imitation that incarnates rather than replicates. In the Proem to *Cligés* Chrétien is explicit on this point. He observes (recurring to the topos of the *translatio studii*) that “chivalry” originated in Greece, then “passed to Rome, together with that highest learning which has now come to France,” where, he prays, it will, with his help, flourish anew. For the fame of the Greeks and Romans is heard no longer: “Their glowing ash,” he says, “is dead.”¹⁴ Their disappearance opens the way for Chrétien, whose writing will not merely be a duplication of what has already been written but a continuation of it as of an ongoing discourse—a discourse that requires Chrétien’s intervention if it is not to go the way of its original authors.

Let me embellish this conception of writing as textual intervention with a note on the Grammarian’s Mythology, which is full of rich and contrary themes. One theme is that the letters of the alphabet contain the universal range of words, and these in turn harbor or conceal all that can be said about all that God has created. To write is to penetrate this system of letters and to disclose some portion of the truth that lies hidden therein as though behind a great veil of words or within a Great Book of the kind imagined by the Alchemists. Writing is thus always in

¹³ *The Rise of Romance*, p. 30. See also pp. 33-52 for a discussion of *conte* and *conjointure*, and esp. p. 37: “It is, then, the art of *composition* in the etymological sense of the term that [Chrétien] seems to regard as the proper means of turning a mere tale of adventure into a romance, and it is upon this delicate art, which only a learned man can practise properly, that he wants the reader to focus his attention. At the same time, however, he does not want us to forget that *conjointure* is merely a method of dealing with the material; it is not a substitute for the *conte*, but something which a skilful poet can and must superimpose upon it. One element is to be added to the other, and the poet would defeat his purpose if he tried to suppress one in favour of the other.”

¹⁴ *Arthurian Romances*, p. 91; *Werke*, I, 1, lines 17-44.

some sense hermeneutic, which means that it is never an original activity but is always mediated by the texts that provide access to the system. To write is to intervene in what has already been written; it is to work "between the lines" of antecedent texts, there to gloss, to embellish, to build invention upon invention. All writing is essentially amplification of discourse; it consists in doing something to (or with) other texts. Currently, Northrop Frye and Jacques Derrida are the most illustrious exponents of this mythology of the letter, and so, in a residual sort of way, is Harold Bloom.

We will misunderstand this mythology of the letter, however, if we do not place beside it its counterpart or antithesis, namely, the figure of the unschooled poet, whose utterances are original by their very nature, because the unschooled poet exists outside the system of letters at the Source or Origin of poetry, as in the story of Orpheus. This figure is as durable as the letter itself—has existed from Homer and Hesiod to Heidegger as a sort of explanatory myth of poetry. Variants of this figure recur in Plato's *Ion* and in the *Peri hupsos* of "Longinus"; in the story of Caedmon and in countless legends of the blind bard; in the pastoral myth, with its figure of the poet as unlearned swain (whose constant recourse is to the "learned Sisters," or Muses, who are the primary agents of his song); in the Renaissance sonnet cycles, whose authors claim to be erring and artless (thus the introspective Astrophel and Shakespeare's "unletter'd Clerk"); in Romantic poetry and poetics and, indeed, in all theories of poetry that privilege voice over script, poetic experience over the poetic work, vision over craft. The poet in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* asks us not to think of his text as a book. "I don't know a single letter of the alphabet," he says at the end of Book II: "Ine kan decheinen buochstap." Wolfram is an aggressive antigrammarian: "Plenty of people get their material that way, but this adventure steers without books. Rather than have anybody think it is a book, I would sit naked without a towel, the way I would sit in a bath": unadorned, unembellished.¹⁵ Of Shakespeare, Dryden's Neander says that "all the Images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily: when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater Commendation: he was naturally learn'd: he needed not the spectacles of Books to read Nature; he look'd inwards, and found her there" (p. 48).

Just so, inwardness is made the source of poetic authority, concerning which history has devised countless theories—of genius, imagina-

¹⁵ *Parzival*, trans. Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage (New York, 1961), p. 65. See Wolfram, *Parzival*, ed. Gottfried Weber (Darmstadt, 1967), p. 97. Reference is to 115.21-116.4.

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tion, creativity, vision, transcendence, individuality, experience. In *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1970), Peter Dronke relies heavily on these value-laden terms in an effort to assert the primary, untraditional, experimental, and therefore original and “ungrammatical” character of certain medieval texts—the *Ruodlieb*, *Semiramis*, the *Ordo Virtutum* of Hildegard of Bingen. And, indeed, one might say that the position of the medieval vernacular poet is unstable: he exists, so to speak, on the periphery of letters and strives to attain the privileged center where Virgil dwells; that is, he is in transit from orality to script, from nature to culture, from the outside to the inside, from anonymity to authority. Yet having once attained the center, he acquires (as perhaps only a grammarian can) the dream of an original utterance, or of speech that originates from within the writer himself rather than from his encounter with other texts. This point contains many issues, some of which are present in one of Petrarch’s letters to Boccaccio:

I grant that I like to embellish my life by quoting others’ words and admonitions, but I do not so adopt them in my writing. I quote the authors with credit, or I transform them honorably, as bees imitate by making a single honey from many nectars. I much prefer that my style be my own, rude and unrefined, perhaps, but made to the measure of my mind, like a well-cut gown, rather than to use someone else’s style, more elegant, ambitious, and ornamented than mine—a style that keeps slipping off, unfitted to the modest proportions of my mind. An actor can wear any kind of garment; but a writer cannot adopt any kind of style. He should form his own and keep it, for fear we should laugh at him, dressed grotesquely in others’ clothes, or plucked, like the crows, by other birds that assemble to reclaim their stolen feathers. Certainly each of us has naturally something individual and his own in utterance and language as in his face and gesture. It is better and more rewarding for us to develop and train this quality than to change it. (*Letters from Petrarch*, p. 183)

The statement that “a writer cannot adopt any kind of style” is a schooled way of defying the school traditions of grammar and rhetoric—and, indeed, perhaps the most important thing to say about Petrarch’s assertion of individuality is that it is composed almost entirely of commonplaces. Hence it is traditional to assert one’s individuality or originality, not explicitly, but by disingenuously confessing the plainness or lowliness of one’s style, even as (by contrast) one asserts one’s authority by claiming kinship with the antique authors, which is the message of the *translatio studii* topos, and which is what Dante is careful to portray in Canto IV of *Inferno*. The *sermo humilis* would in this view be the natural language of original authorship, although it is not so for Dante, who, as part of his effort to overcome the opposition between authority and originality, claims that the vernacular is both natural and illustrious.

In a fine essay on "Petrarch and the Humanist Hermeneutic" Thomas M. Greene cites this letter of Petrarch's from which I have quoted. It is, he says, an instance of humanist composition, which is self-assertive writing that, nevertheless, bears within itself "the latent presence of an ancient author."¹⁶ For Greene, the humanist text is not one text but two: it harbors an ancient subtext or an array of such subtexts, which means that the interpretation of the humanist text requires an act of subreading that can catch the encounter of humanist and antiquity. This encounter entails but is not reducible to exchanges of matter or doctrine because it is, as Petrarch makes clear in the quoted letter, above all a stylistic exchange. As Greene explains, "The interplay between the surface text and the antecedent or sub-text involves subtle interpenetrations, an interflowing and tingeing, an exchange of minute gradations, that cannot be measured wholly or formulated . . . Reading and sub-reading it means dealing with the implicit, the incipient, the virtual, and the inexpressible—'ut intelligi simile queat potius quam dici' " ["The quality is to be felt rather than defined"] (p. 213). This felt, ghostly, or unspoken otherness defines for Greene the openness of the humanist text, which unfolds inwardly upon a whole civilization of authorship—to which it now adds itself as a distinctive yet authoritative utterance.

My own inclination, however, has been to speak of a text that opens outwardly rather than inwardly, in the sense that it seems to a later hand to invite or require collaboration, amplification, embellishment, illustration to disclose the hidden or the as-yet-unthought-of. A useful notion in this connection is the medieval concept of *translatio*, or turning, which is more than the turning of a text into another language because it implicates the notion of metaphorical turning as well.¹⁷ My argument would be that in a manuscript culture to translate means also the turning of a prior text into something more completely itself, or something more than what it *literally* is. I can refine this somewhat by saying that in a manuscript culture the text is not reducible to the letter; that is, a text always contains more than what it says, or what its letters contain, which is why we are privileged to read between the lines, and not to read between them only but to write between them as well, because the text is simply not complete—not fully what it could be, as in the case of the dark story that requires an illuminating retelling. This is why it is important to remember that the grammarian's embellish-

¹⁶ *Italian Literature: Roots and Branches; Essays in Honor of Thomas Goddard Bergin*, ed. Giose Rimanelli and Kenneth John Atchity (New Haven, Conn., 1976), p. 211.

¹⁷ My indebtedness here is to Douglas Kelly, "Translatio Studii: Translation, Adaptation, and Allegory in Medieval French Literature," *PQ*, 57 (1978), 287-310.

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ment is an art of disclosure as well as an art of amplification: the act of adding to a text is also the act of eliciting from it that which remains unspoken. Embellishment adds luster, but this addition illuminates what is hidden in the original, which is to say again that a text is never reducible to the letters of which it is composed but is always capable of becoming more than it is. The text is, in any case, tacitly unfinished: it is never fully present but is always available for a later hand to bring it more completely into the open.

But what precisely is this "open"—this space between the lines in which the grammarian embellisher intervenes? In an appendix to his *Truth and Method* Hans-Georg Gadamer says that "it is part of the reality of a work of art that around its real theme it leaves an area that is indefinite"—an indeterminate area that waits to be filled or fulfilled with a meaning. "To leave an enormous amount open," Gadamer says, "seems to belong to the essence of a fruitful fable and to myth. Precisely thanks to its open indeterminacy, myth is able to produce constant new inventions from within itself, with the thematic horizon continuously shifting out in different directions."¹⁸ Gadamer gives us here another instance in which it is not easy to distinguish between interpretation and invention, originality and belatedness, imitation and discovery. One of the things I have tried to show in this paper is how much more difficult it is to make these distinctions when one is concerned with rhetorical rather than Romantic invention—that is, invention conceived as the art of finding what it is that can be said in any given case, not invention as "creative" and unprecedented origination. The grammarian embellisher as I have constructed him is rhetorically rather than Romantically inventive: he is the writer who dwells among texts and who is always discovering in them more things to say. He is, as Gadamer might say, alive to their empty spaces, their areas of indefiniteness—regions that are not reducible to absences but are rather like horizons that continually open onto new landscapes. Hence for the grammarian there is nothing that cannot be rewritten or enriched by further writing, because no text is closed to him, not even (as we have seen) Virgil's. He dwells, it is important to remember, *among* texts, not over and against them, and accordingly he is without anxiety, because his antecedents are great inventories that produce in him the copious mind, which is a mind capable of endless invention—invention which is, however, textual rather than "natural," insofar as its point of departure is always prior writing, not worldly or mental experience. The library (or its mental equivalent, memory) is the grammarian's equivalent of Romantic imagination.

¹⁸ *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975), p. 454.

Yet to speak in this fashion about the grammarian and his texts is at once to doubt whether the word "text" is appropriate to the conception of writing and rewriting that is at work in a manuscript culture. The word "text" itself is worth consulting in this regard. Etymologically it refers to the way words are put together in a piece of writing, their weave or texture in a written discourse, or their (more or less) formal order, pattern, or sequence. Its early vernacular usage is in almost exclusive reference to Scripture, that is, Revelation in its written character: there is only one "text," and that is the Bible. The metaphor of openness finds its complication in the fact that in both cases the word "text" refers to something which is not to be altered but which, on the contrary, must be adhered to—scribally, morally, doctrinally, and so on. Indeed, it appears that there can be no conception of "text" without a corresponding notion of fixity. Thus Chaucer is thinking of his work textually, that is, as authorized writing that must be reproduced word for word, when he admonishes his scribe:

ADAM scriveyn, if ever it thee bifalle
 Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,
 Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,
 But after my makyng thou wryte more trewe;
 So ofte a-daye I mot thy werk renewe,
 It to correcte and eek to rubbe and scrape;
 And al is thorough thy negligence and rape.

(*Works*, p. 534)

A text is simply fixed writing, and is therefore closed by definition. To speak of an open text thus makes no sense at all—until one remembers Chaucer in relation to *Il Filostrato*: Why did Chaucer not treat this text as a text (that is, as closed)? Why did he not adhere to it—or, more accurately, why is his adherence to it sometimes embarrassingly faithful (word for word, saving "oure tonges difference," I.395) and sometimes marred beautifully by embellishments? The question is interesting in part because one of Chaucer's purposes was simply to produce a vernacular version of the more literary Italian: it was in effect to determine whether a poem like *Il Filostrato* could exist in English. It is doubly interesting, however, because Chaucer's narrator in the *Troilus* is nothing if not "textuel," which is the word Chaucer regularly uses to describe those who are clerkly or literary, who know texts word for word and are proud of their ability to adhere to or reproduce them exactly, literally, as with a strict scribal devotion to the fixed and the authorized. The Parson's Prologue has these lines:

But natheless, this meditacioun
 I putte it ay under correccioun
 Of clerkes, for I am nat textuel;

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I take but the sentence, trusteth weel.
Therefore I make protestacioun
That I wol stonde to correccioun.
(lines 55-60)

The Parson is not a man of letters, but a man of sentences. By contrast, the narrator of the *Troilus* insists everywhere that "Myn auctour shal I folwen, if I konne" (II.49). He is more scribe than grammarian, which is to say of lesser authority than the grammarian, in the sense that he is not authorized to go beyond the letter of his original. What this means is that to be original is not to be "textuel," which in Chaucer's case means that one cannot imitate one's "auctores" simply by following their texts word by word; rather, to imitate an "auctor" requires that one take words into one's own hand, thus to weave them (or to reweave them) according to one's own sense, design, wisdom, or grasp of the hiddenness of meanings. To imitate an "auctor" means precisely the imitation of authority rather than of a text. To be original in this sense is to transcend textuality (as indeed one is expected always to transcend the letter in behalf of the spirit). To be original is to transcend the literalness of one's antecedent texts by finding in them openings for further invention. The grammarian embellisher, therefore, is not a textualist; rather, he aspires to the authority of his originals, and indeed may attain it—but with this difference, that his mode of aspiration or composition can no longer be the mode of original utterance or authorship, because it is necessarily an inter- rather than extralinear mode. The grammarian is preeminently the schooled writer, whose desire is to transcend the letters that limit and define him.

The doubleness or even duplicity implicit in this desire is perfectly represented by *Troilus and Criseyde*, with its scribal narrator or man of letters whose profession of literalness conceals only to emphasize the richness of the grammarian-poet's embellishments. Another way to put this might be to say that the grammarian's originality is itself inter- rather than extralinear: it is textually derived by an act of writing that (contrary to Romantic poetics) does not seek to put aside or to destroy its forbearing text but rather seeks to assimilate that text into its own embellishing spirit and even to confer upon it thereby a presence it would not otherwise possess. Thus for many readers (most English-speaking readers, certainly) *Il Filostrato* is always more than itself because it exists inseparably from the *Troilus*: we might not come to it if translation and embellishment had not constituted for Chaucer a normal mode of composition—arguably *the* mode of vernacular *poiesis*. Our modern attachment to "creativity" inclines us (I hesitate to say "trains us") to resist this point, whose assimilation might be assisted, however, by a final thought: the text as I have been discussing it is still as much

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an utterance as an object; it exists as an adjunct to speech. It is an utterance in a form that one might write as well as read. Indeed, it is an utterance that bears repeating, which is as good a way as any of defining an authoritative utterance (the kind of utterance for which or of which texts are made). For Chaucer, at any rate, *Il Filostrato* was a text worth repeating, but grammatically rather than scribally so: the repetition of *Il Filostrato* provides the text in which the *Troilus* is to be found.

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